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DAVID BALDWIN

L'Atalante and the Maturing of Jean Vigo

The artistic miracle that is *Zéro de Conduite* has, in common with all the very few first films which contain in unpolished form the radical power of genius, the quality of being constantly astonished by itself. Film for the unfledged artist is, by the unique circumstances of its creation, the most serendipitous medium. A novelist or painter usually has the evidence of his talent in hand before he tries to notify the world of it, but the beginning director somehow has to assemble, at enormous cost of time and energy, all the necessary elements—financial backing, a cast and crew, technical facilities, official cooperation—before he can demonstrate his divine right to direct. It is certain that Vigo had his story very clearly in his mind when he walked into the studio (he could not have survived otherwise), but most of the film was shot so rapidly, with so many scenes rewritten and then recorded in a single take, that Vigo had no choice but to discover himself as he went along. The resulting work is both terribly amateurish and startlingly self-assured; it has many of the faults but almost all of the virtues of immaturity.¹

There are scenes which seem attenuated and poorly staged, such as the conference between the head supervisor and the dwarf principal. But this is intercut with the lovely sequence in which the merry young junior master, Huguet, leads his charges on a Sunday outing through the village, while that other child, the camera, follows him, popping up in the most unexpectedly right places, drawing laughter from the incongruity between the ebullient freedom of the children and their

seamless unity. The film as a whole may be compared to that procession of urchins: anarchic but orderly, ragtag yet ineffably perfect.

No film-maker, however original, can sustain such exuberance and spontaneity over an entire career. (Strangely enough, that most ironic and sophisticated of directors, Buñuel, has probably come closest to this ideal.) So perhaps it was fortunate for Vigo that the subject of his subsequent film, *L'Atalante*, was imposed on him by his producer. With *Zéro de Conduite*, Vigo had found the proper form for an emotion that was central to his experience; with *L'Atalante*, he took a theme that was alien to him and by means of his instinctive gift absorbed it completely into the artistic world that *Zéro* had built. This strange and elusive work made its director a master, and I cannot be the only one who, seeing it for the first time, imagined it to be the film its creator had always dreamed of making.²

It is possible to overstress the movie's strangeness. Mundane activities, such as washing clothes, cleaning floors, eating a meal, are shown as simply as any advocate of naturalism could wish. All the characters' actions are presented within a very circumscribed narrative frame; the only scene which is blatantly antirealistic is the famous one in which the hero, Jean, while swimming, sees the gigantic image of his beloved floating in the water.

Yet the atmosphere of dream subtly pervades almost everything in the film. The tone is one of delicately surreal humor which never sinks to whimsicality. *L'Atalante* is the exact opposite of a film like *Miracle in Milan*, with

its magic doves and angels that stop for traffic lights. Such a picture is like a man who makes up tall stories for children. The pleasure for both teller and audience is in the outlandishness that constantly surpasses itself without severing the tenuous thread of the tale's logic. When such a storyteller succeeds (as De Sica and Zavattini did), the results can be memorable, but the fantasy has no resonance. A sense of incongruity is not the same as a sense of mystery.

L'Atalante has nothing of the tall tale about it. The strangest conceits—the sailor's disembodied hands that Père Jules keeps in a jar or his sudden decision to have his hair cut almost to the scalp by a dog barber—are all displayed within the context of character. The people in the film, their longings and imaginings and fears, are the source of its imagery, and Vigo creates for them a poetic aura which connects their individual emotions with common human desire and loss.

When I say that Vigo matured with this film, I mean that he had begun to exercise the full control over his style that had been absent from his début. This style comprises conflicting tendencies toward expansion and extreme compression; that is, an opposition between a lyrical and a grotesque mode of perception. The lyrical mode is characterized by the expansion of a particular action in order to lend the mood created by that action its maximum emotional expressiveness and force. One of the ways this effect is achieved is by deliberately prolonging the time span in which the act is contemplated. The most famous example of the lyrical element in Vigo's work occurs in *Zéro de Conduite*, with the children's midnight march through the dormitory (one of the most beautiful uses of slow motion in the history of the screen), in which Vigo employs the imagery of a religious procession to bless the boys' revolution.

The grotesque mode is marked by a sort of caricaturing of the face of reality, using elliptical editing, disorienting camera angles and shock effects to exaggerate some inherently bizarre action or circumstance. The most vivid grotesque scene in *Zéro* is the one in which the dwarf principal nervously and incoherently lectures the frail schoolboy Tabard on the dangers of establishing too close an intimacy with an older friend. In the scene's final

shot, the dwarf suddenly pops up like a malign Jack-in-the-box, beard bristling, and shouts: "Who knows?" That there is no preparation for this metamorphosis is the key to the director's method. He explores a situation in order to bring out what is absurd or strange in it, discovers the unique visual image that will best convey that strangeness, and quickly moves on.

The stress between the lyrical and grotesque elements in his style is one of the things that make Vigo's films so disorienting. His movies have no *pace*: any given scene is liable to be stretched to the limits of its eloquence (but never beyond) or squeezed until only its dramatic essence remains. This film artist, more than most, plays Time like a composer, subtly manipulating it at will.

The opening sequence of *L'Atalante* exemplifies the ways Vigo achieved mastery of his stylistic traits. The film begins with three establishing shots: the boat of the title lying at anchor in a small river town; a view of the river, over which a thick mist mysteriously rises; a church steeple. The three images show the heroine's two worlds—the land (church) and the river—as well as the boat which links them and will eventually reconcile them.

The next shot shows the old ship's mate, Père Jules (Michel Simon), and the adolescent cabin boy (Louis Lefèvre) running along the side of the church in the speeded-up tempo of silent film comedies, recalling Vigo's expressed preference for the silent film over sound.³ This is followed by a view of the newly married couple—Juliette (Dita Parlo) in her dazzlingly white gown, Jean (Jean Dasté) somewhat stiff in his barge captain's uniform—leaving the church, with the guests exiting behind them. From snatches of conversation, the viewer quickly understands the situation: the barge captain is a stranger to the town, the courtship was an extraordinarily fast one, and the decision of Juliette to marry the captain was in part a quiet act of defiance against the town and is perceived as such by the townspeople.

The director reinforces the aloneness of the couple in the subsequent shot, which shows them walking with exaggerated dignity towards the boat, while the crowd (in a departure from the script) follows at a considerable distance. The extreme gravity of the bride



and groom and the speed with which they walk do not provoke the viewer to laughter, though he may notice that they do not go in unison and that their seemingly determined steps are really very timid and tentative. This image, which is of longer duration than almost any other in the film, poignantly conveys this particular couple's estrangement from the world.

Intercut with this lyrical passage is the sequence showing Père Jules and the cabin boy at the river bank. While rehearsing the dance with which they intend to welcome Jean and Juliette to the barge, they kick the bride's bouquet off the bank and into the water. Trying to find a substitute, the boy goes off to the fields and returns with a grotesque horseshoe of wild flowers. The current reverses, bringing back to the dock the original bouquet, which the boy retrieves. All this low-comedy business is presented by Vigo with fast editing and harsh camera angles, contrasting the clumsiness of the old man and boy with the dignity of the couple.

When the captain and Juliette finally reach the dock, the boy hands them the dripping bouquet. Here there is a strange close-up of the bride, her heavy-lidded eyes conveying an extraordinary loneliness and melancholy. The image of the lovers united against a hostile world has given way to the image of the solitary frightened individual. Whenever I have seen the film in a theater where there were more than a handful of people, this shot has always provoked loud laughter. I do not know if Vigo intended this reaction, but it is not inappropriate. As wistful and pathetic as her expression is, her situation remains essentially a comic one.

The boat, with Juliette on board, is finally

ready to cast off. As it moves away from the dock, the happy groom at the pilot's wheel cheers and waves his cap in the air. But the wedding party, filmed from Jean's point of view, stands rigidly on the river bank in grim, nightmarish silence.

This whole introductory passage is a kind of *précis* of the director's style—Vigo in concentrate. There is also something new to the artist here, an ability to use the different aspects of his style to exhibit character. Juliette, who softens the overwhelmingly masculine ambiance of the barge, gets the lion's share of the movie's lyrical, expansive moments, while Père Jules, a character almost as anarchic and beast-like as Boudu the tramp in Renoir's film (a role also played by Michel Simon) is presented in scenes as rough-edged, abrupt and unruly as himself. It should be emphasized that the grotesque images associated with Père Jules are not less poetic than the gentler ones associated with Juliette. In some ways, they are *more* poetic. The lovely, strange, mercurial individuality of the old man invites Vigo's artistic sympathy far more than the conventional beauty of the heroine. Similarly, Dita Parlo, a charming and admirable actress, is no competition for Michel Simon, whose instincts are so sure that he seems to become the sea-scarred shipmate, the "premental old man,"⁴ he is playing.

One of the film's most important scenes, both for the delineation of the character of Jules and for Vigo's treatment of the grotesque, is the one in which Jules gives Juliette a guided tour of his cabin. One of the first objects he shows her is a puppet representing a long-haired, rather seedy orchestra conductor. He sets the mechanism of the toy going and there is a marvelous close-up of the doll, lit harshly from below, passionately (or drunkenly) directing a little music-box tune as if it were a Wagner overture. The goal of drawing Juliette (and the viewer) into the old sailor's magical world is achieved.

This image, however, is not isolated. It is repeated, very beautifully and artistically, much later in the film. Juliette, stranded in Paris, wishes to buy a ticket for a train that will bring her to the next city at which the barge is scheduled to dock, there to be reunited with Jean. But an emaciated-looking young man trails her, and as she stands at the

ticket booth groping in her purse for the money, the man snatches it. In his haste the thief drops the purse (Juliette never recovers it) and the angry mob, in a high-angle shot, closes round him and knocks him down. In the following shot, the police are shown taking him away, an iron fence intervening between the culprit and the camera, and the thief's movements as he is being dragged along startlingly evoke those of the mechanical conductor, minus almost all of the puppet's energy and passion, as if the conductor-thief were running down and were just about to stop. Such linkings between scenes, so typical of the director's mature style, are made so subtly that they tend to go unnoticed; only in later viewings do these correspondences of mood and image become clear.

Encouraged by Juliette's delight in his puppet, Père Jules continues to show off his possessions. As the camera follows them, hovering above and slightly behind them, they circle the room, admiring his hunting horn, an elephant's tooth, a large Spanish knife, the ancient photo of the girl he left behind in San Francisco and a pair of pickled hands (belonging to a long-dead fellow sailor) preserved in a jar. Not content with exhibiting these souvenirs, Jules takes off his shirt and displays the ones on his body—his numerous tattoos. Salles-Gomes in his book on Vigo claims that "the apparent disorder in Père Jules' behavior in this situation corresponds to the patient and systematic method of a Don Juan seducer."⁵ This statement, implying that the seduction of Juliette is Jules's conscious aim, strikes me as absurd, given the context of the scene. The bonds that have joined these two happy conspirators are a common childishness (not a flaw, in Vigo's view) and a shared resentment of the increasingly despotic behavior of Jean. Up to this point, there has been no contact between them that could justly be called sexual.

Juliette's innocent flirtatiousness, however, begins to surface as she plays with the old man's hair and falls onto his bunk, laughing. Jules leans over her and there is a very brief low-angle shot of the two characters, with Jules's face at the center of the composition. Michel Simon in this odd moment expresses desire in a unique way: the sailor recognizes for the first time that his captain's wife is not



merely a playmate but a woman to be loved, and his face is subdued, even grieved, by lust. He instinctively starts to move away when Jean suddenly enters the cabin and, assuming the worst, explodes with rage. Andrew Sarris once wrote about a scene in a John Ford film which revealed a subtle truth about a minor character: "if it had taken [Ford] any longer than three shots and a few seconds to establish this insight . . . the point would not be worth making."⁶ Vigo uses an even more rigorous economy of style to express the poignancy of the old mate's (not fully conscious) sexual conflict.

One of the movie's loveliest lyrical conceits is the use of similar environments as back-grounds to link the couple emotionally after they have been separated. When Juliette mutinies and goes on her brief fling in Paris, Jean, fed up with his bride's caprices, orders Jules to cast off. Juliette returns to the quay to find the boat gone. The grayness of the humid air at dawn, combined with the desolate setting of sand and stone and steel uprights, makes vivid Juliette's desperate isolation.

When Jean later realizes that his separation from Juliette is permanent, he falls into such a profound depression that he becomes virtually a zombie. At the dock at Le Havre, he sits staring into space and then suddenly runs away from Père Jules. In a wonderful panning shot, Jean dashes to the sea as if to find his wife there. The viewer first sees him in the distance, the camera positioned close to the ground. Jean comes up to within a few yards of the camera and speeds away, as the sand on the beach, the sun hitting it just right, glistens in the footprints he has left behind him, until in the middle distance he finally reaches the sea and stops. The shot is beautiful, and it beautifully corresponds, in its brilliant use of grays (by the late cinematographer Boris Kaufman), to the earlier shot of Juliette at the quay. The use of the camera in the two scenes, however, is very different: typically, Vigo eschews any strictly symmetrical scheme.

The most striking example of visual “coincidences” linking husband and wife occurs after the passage in which the captain sees his wife’s image floating in the water. When he pulls himself out of the river, and old Jules and the cabin boy demonstrate to him the miracle of the broken phonograph that now plays a lovely Maurice Jaubert waltz, Jean breaks away from them and goes to the stern of the barge. He gazes there at a bridge receding in the distance, seeking Juliette, and the next shot shows her standing upon a similar bridge in Paris (with the Jaubert music still playing on the sound track), so that the viewer, accustomed to the shot-reverse shot rhythm of conventional movies, unconsciously looks beyond the heroine to search for a non-existent barge in the background.

The viewer is then shown Jean undressing for bed in his cabin, while Juliette in her squalid rented room does the same. As Jean drags himself into bed, she climbs into hers, and there follows a series of dissolves depicting the couple passing a miserably sleepless night (the use of the dissolve suggesting an interminable series of such nights) in their separate rooms. Vigo illuminates the faces and bodies of the two actors through a kind of netting, so that they seem to be covered all over with black spots, as if they were suffering from some contagious disease. The arching of one back is echoed by the arching

of another; the movement of one head wearily raising itself towards the camera is completed by its counterpart dropping back onto the pillow. The two characters seem to be groping towards one another, as if seeking some *Persona*-like fusion of being, but this fails and they collapse into a weariness beyond sleep—as the Jaubert waltz finally ends. Of all the lyrical sequences in the film, this is the most ambitious and best sustained.

The climactic scene of *L’Atalante* wonderfully harmonizes the opposing tendencies of Vigo’s style. The old man, finding the situation on board the barge intolerable, goes off to find Juliette. Meanwhile, she, unable to get work in Paris, wanders into a record store and approaches the woman behind the cashier’s window to ask for a job, but is rebuffed. Drifting over to the opposite side of the store, she discovers a counter above which are situated a bank of earphones through which customers can sample new records. Juliette notices that the tired cashier is becoming increasingly drowsy and she watches as the woman begins to nod off. As soon as she is completely asleep, Juliette picks up one of the earphones and listens to a charming Maurice Jaubert tune, which is also broadcast through a loudspeaker onto the street outside the store. Jules hears it, is captivated by it and, temporarily deflected from his “impossible” search, enters the record store.

There follows a two-shot in which Père Jules tenderly approaches Juliette, who is too caught up in the music to notice him. The next shot shows the glass countertop in which are reflected the two faces; she looks down and recognizes Jules. Earlier, Jean in his fit of jealous rage had broken the old man’s mirror, leaving him to mutter solemnly about evil omens. The rift between the couple that this act of violence presaged is, in the penultimate scene, healed through the agency of another “mirror” that revives the conspiratorial friendship of the two companions, leading in turn to the reconciliation of the lovers.

In the succeeding high-angle shot, the viewer at first sees only the countertop and the earphones. Juliette backs into the frame from the right until she stands within the left half of the frame. Jules enters from the right and comes to a stop opposite her. The look on Dita Parlo’s face is a marvellous mixture



of bewilderment, delight and apprehension; Michel Simon's expression is similar to the one in the cabin scene, in which he is overcome by desire. The viewer waits, expecting Jules to speak, but instead he suddenly lifts her over his shoulder like cargo and carries her off, as screaming bystanders enter the frame in their wake.

This scene, of course, by using Jules as an intermediary, resolves the dramatic conflict between husband and wife. But it also resolves the battle within Jules's soul. By "shanghaiing" Juliette, the old sailor is able to act out his fantasy of continuing virility (much more important to him than actual seduction), while serving his friend the captain as well as his own sense of decency. When the two characters arrive at the boat, Jules can now very tenderly, and a trifle sadly, surrender the woman to her husband. Near the beginning of the film, the old man stops at the font of the church to cross himself and mumblingly repeats the priest's words: "I pronounce you man and wife in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit." In the final scene, Jules is wordlessly acting the role of priest, uniting the couple in a richer, deeper union.

I am aware, as I write about Jules's "capture" of Juliette, that it would require another article entirely to account for the singular beauty of the scene. The lyrical elements (e.g., the music used as a means of drawing the characters together) and the grotesque elements (Père Jules carrying Juliette off from the record shop) are blended so skillfully that they seem nearly indistinguishable aspects of the same strange and lovely dream. The camera angles are astonishingly fresh and vivid; Vigo seems to have been almost incapable

psychologically of placing the camera in the positions dictated by conventional film-making. Asymmetrical compositions, seemingly random but in fact quite logical high-angle shots, the refusal to let the camera follow the characters as they wander out of the frame—these are some characteristic features of his style, here as elsewhere. As to the editing, it is almost beyond praise. It is far from the kind of cutting that is lauded as "seamless." It is swift, elliptical, nervous, the technique of someone who wishes to excite and provoke. In all these respects—stylistic harmony, camera placement, editing—this scene is beyond anything attempted in *Zéro de Conduite*.

When an artist dies young, there is a tendency to focus so sharply on the tragedy of lost potential that it is tragically easy to lose sight of what was achieved. For the admirers of Jean Vigo, who did not reach thirty, the temptation to morbid regret and moot speculation would seem to be particularly powerful. Yet this danger has for the most part been averted, and I believe that the reason for this is the fact that Vigo's career did not end with *Zéro de Conduite*. If it had, dismissing his initial masterpiece as a fluke would have been an easy matter. Because of *L'Atalante*, we see *Zéro* not as an isolated tour de force, but as the beginnings of a fluid, dynamic, surprisingly varied style capable of being adapted to a wide range of expressive purposes. The artist, in his second work, had gained a new discipline and control over his technique, polishing and refining it without sacrificing its freshness and flow. Just as importantly, he had been able to transcend his private obsessions, or rather to shape recalcitrant material to the contours of his obsessions.

The life and career of Jean Vigo are fascinating for many reasons, not least as a study in unrelenting frustration, controversy and sheer bad luck. The son of a legendary anarchist, he saw his films fall into the hands of the anarchist's twin enemies: the bureaucrats (who banned *Zéro de Conduite*) and the businessmen (who mutilated *L'Atalante* for "commercial" reasons). Yet Vigo, in many ways the most tragic of all great directors, was sufficiently fortunate not to have died before having attained mastery of his noble art.

NOTES

1. I refer to *Zéro de Conduite* here as the artist's "first film" because the two short works that preceded it—*A Propos de Nice* and *Taris*—are in a sense essays, experiments in form and style which, though touched with Vigo's unique visual poetry, are not fully realized and self-contained aesthetic statements, as *Zéro* clearly is.
2. All information on the origin and development of Vigo's films is taken from *Jean Vigo* by P. E. Salles-Gomes (University of California Press, 1971), the definitive biography of Vigo and

the most important full-length critical study of his work. The account of the making of *L'Atalante* appears on pp. 150–184. (Any differences of opinion I may express with some of Salles-Gomes's interpretations should in no way be construed as a general criticism of his admirable and moving work.)

3. Salles-Gomes, p. 71.
4. James Agee, *Agee On Film*, Vol. 1, p. 265, from the review of *L'Atalante* in *The Nation*, July 12, 1947.
5. Salles-Gomes, p. 164.
6. Andrew Sarris, *The American Cinema*, p. 47 (Dutton, 1968).

Reviews

A LOVE IN GERMANY

(*Eine Liebe in Deutschland*) Directed by Andrzej Wajda. Screenplay by Bolesław Michalek, Agnieszka Holland, and Wajda, from a novel by Rolf Hochhuth. Photography: Igor Luther. Editing: Halina Prugar-Ketting. Music: Michel LeGrand. Produced by Arthur Brauner for CCC Filmkunst (West Berlin)/Gaumont/TF 1 Films Production (Paris). Distributed by Triumph Films. 1983.

Stories about World War II are nothing new in the repertoire of Andrzej Wajda. Wajda's first four films, all completed during the fifties, dealt with either the war itself (*A Generation*, *Kanal*, *Lotna*) or its social and political aftermath (*Ashes and Diamonds*), and expressed the pathos of memories still fresh. With the completion of *Landscape After Battle* in 1970, we began to see a Wajda looking back from a more distant perspective, his sense of tragedy still strong but tinted with finer subtleties. *A Love in Germany* carries this progression further. With the passage of still more time, we find that Wajda's perspective has softened but not at all dulled. In this film, a German-French coproduction, the foremost Polish director of our era has taken a simple wartime love story and fashioned a piece of cinema that is both beautiful and complex.

We enter the story in 1983, through the viewpoint of Herbert (Otto Sander), a 49-year-old German returning to his childhood home in the province of Baden-Württemberg. Something that happened in the past troubles Herbert, and he is determined to learn the truth about it. He brings his 17-year-old son Klaus (Ben Becker), because he wants him to know about it, too.

Herbert and Klaus bicycle into the little town of Brombach, and soon we flash back to 1941. The story that unfolds is about Herbert's

mother, Pauline Kropp (Hanna Schygulla) and her love affair, in violation of Nazi law, with a Polish prisoner-of-war. It is also about Pauline's neighbors, who suspect and disapprove but do not agree on what should be done; about local officials who would prefer to ignore Pauline's crime; and about prisoners of war who speak passionately of freedom and proclaim the indomitability of the Polish spirit but, in their moment of reckoning, turn into mewling crybabies. It is a many-layered story told in a language resonant with irony.

On the top layer, *A Love in Germany* is what its title announces, a drama about great love, about a passion so undeniable that it drives the two lovers to their doom. Pauline's love for Stani (Piotr Lysak) exists separately from all else in her life. She cannot choose between Stani and her husband Hermann, off fighting the war like other German men, because her passion for the younger Pole transports her beyond the state of mind in which choices can be rationally made. Nor can she deny her love for Stani even when offered the opportunity to save herself by doing so; she chooses, instead, certain imprisonment, disgrace, the loss of her family. On this level, *A Love in Germany* is a twentieth-century *Romeo and Juliet*, a story of a love damned by society.

On another level, it is a story about courage. In the film's first flashback, Karl Wyler (Gerard Desarthe), comes to town in his army uniform for a brief furlough. The local mayor tells him things are fine, the women of Brombach are brave. Yet it is the women in the film who are least courageous; it is they who are most bothered by Pauline's behavior—Frau Melchior, in whose home Stani is billeted;